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AUTHOR Garfield, Jo
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ABSTRACT

At Southerland Institute (a pseudonym), in spite of the teacher's strong statements in favor of encouraging students to think for themselves and to work together, the writing program Southerland's teachers outline is formulaic with its required modes, prescribed five-paragraph-like essay form, and bell-curve grading practices. A new rhetorician (as a "good" virus) needs to work from within to change the program. Southerland's freshman writing program provides at least seven doors for effecting change: (1) initiating dialogue through the first essay; (2) using peer groups; (3) workshopping; (4) treating the essays like "daily work"; (5) keeping logs; (6) conferencing; and (7) writing comments on students' papers. Some traditionalists may be surprised that modern rhetoricians show much interest in form. Modernists believe, however, that student papers should demonstrate that good thinking creates its own forms and avoids borrowing them. (MG)

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Virus Infects Comp 101

At Southerland Institute

by

Jo Garfield

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Virus Infects Comp 101 at Southerland Institute

Southerland Institute [pseudonym] operates its College Composition classes as if they were models for Knoblauch and Brannon's "Ancient Rhetoric in Modern Classrooms: That Old-Time Religion" found in their book Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing.

Southerland outlines its freshman English program in two official documents: "Student Guide to Modes for Moderns: Composition 101, 102" and "Teacher Guide to Modes for Moderns." [Pseud.]

Knoblauch and Brannon could have been looking at those guides when they wrote:

> The teaching of writing is still dominated by concerns for modes and forms of discourse: description, narration, exposition; five-paragraph themes; comparison/contrast essays; topic-sentence paragraphs; plain versus elevated, or correct versus incorrect, style. (46)

Knoblauch and Brannon would not be surprised that Southerland includes conferencing, workshopping, and peer evaluations as part of the writing program, for they have observed that "closet classicists know about peer groups, personal writing, and revision, like everyone else" (101).

At Southerland, students in Modes 101 write one free-form essay while they study a unit in Modes for Moderns on structuring the essay. Students also write five thesis-oriented 500-word essays chosen from among the usual modal forms for exposition.

Modes 102 students write four 500-word persuasive/ argumentative essays (including the final examination essay) and a model MLA research paper.

A modern rhetorician would reject the prescriptiveness of Southerland's freshman composition program (especially with its imposition of modes upon student essays). Certainly the modal approach troubles both the students and me. But the modes generally receive the kind of respect given the Sphinx, something to admire because of its age, perhaps. They are very much a part of the writing program.

A teacher who believes that writers create form rather than discover it could become discouraged enough to quit--to leave Southerland and its formalistic approach to teaching writing. If the new rhetorician were to leave the program, however, a classical rhetorician might fill the vacancy. Then who would agitate for change, resist formalism, champion thought before form?

A virus is capable of replication only within the cells of its host. It can do nothing from the outside. For the same reasons, the new rhetorician [as a good virus, of course] needs to work from within the program to effect change.

Teachers in the English department at Southerland should not need a Paulo Freire to point out the dangers of a philosophy or a practice that puts form before thought or puts competition [for grades] in place of cooperation. But, in spite of teacher's strong statements in favor of encouraging students to think for themselves and to work together, the writing program Southerland's

teachers outline is formulaic with its required modes, prescribed five-paragraph-like essay form, and bell-curve grading practices.

I do not know how to address the problem of assigning grades. To ignore the department's philosophy of grading would be to invite more trouble than I can handle. To cooperate with the system means lots of stress for both students and teacher.

Since at Southerland a teacher's freedom pertains only to classroom approaches and not to grading, focusing upon classroom approaches may be the best way to try to change a program from one driven by form to one created by thought--the independent thinking of each student writer in the program.

How can one hope to get rid of the prescribed modes? What classroom approaches could a writing instructor at Southerland use that might stimulate members of the English department to consider putting thought before form rather than prescribing forms for unwritten essays?

Forget the modes? Not allowed.

Appeal to reason? Of course.

I can't think of anyone who advocates buying clothes for grown children or grandchildren yet to be conceived. Most of my friends do not even venture to buy clothes for their very real twenty-year-olds even when they know their sizes. They let their grown children buy what the children will wear rather than waste money on clothes that never get worn and have to be given to Goodwill.

People who have learned that much about buying clothing for children can also learn to let writers create the forms which fit

their thoughts best rather than imposing one-size-fits-all forms manufactured before the idea is born, or conceived, or even dreamed about.

But, again, how can modern rhetoricians--students and teachers--appeal to the reason of traditionalists?

Entering Wedges. Southerland's freshman writing program does provide opportunities for effecting change--and all within policy.

At least seven doors are open for effecting change: (1) initiating dialogue through the first essay, (2) using peer groups, (3) workshopping, (4) treating the essays like "daily work," (5) keeping logs, (6) conferencing, and (7) writing comments on students' papers.

First Paper. The teacher's guide allows the teacher and students to experiment in choosing the kind of paper to write for the first assignment. Therefore, the class could use this first essay to start a dialogue about thinking, writing, and creating form; then keep the dialogue alive throughout the course.

Peer Groups. The teacher's guide calls for peer evaluations. Although part of the purpose of peer evaluations is to make papers conform to assigned modes and to a five-paragraph formula, by working together, students and teachers could find ways to redefine the word "evaluate" or displace it with "invaluate"--give value to rather than put a price tag on thinking and writing; create rather than discover.

Workshopping. Creative peer group activities and many other inventive possibilities can come through the door labeled "workshopping." Again, although the department's intent is to steer essays into predetermined forms, the very fact that workshopping is encouraged opens the way for a modern rhetorician to modify the existing structure. [We all--classicists or modernists--champion thinking, of course.]

Essays as "Daily Work." The teacher's guide says that teachers may choose their own classroom approaches. They should, however, make use of workshopping, peer evaluations, and integrated instruction. What approaches, then, should the modernist choose? Evaluating process essays as daily work may be a place to start.

Juggling Weights. Although Southerland's English department has prescribed percentage values to daily work, essays, and tests, the class can evaluate process writing as daily work rather than as modal essay.

The percent of the grade assigned to essays will still have to involve modal essays, however.

Presently the modes dominate all composition classroom activities and assignments. So long as that approach to writing exists in the department, form will steer the program.

Nevertheless, a teacher can encourage students to think, to tackle problems, to create forms appropriate to their thoughts, rather than to fill modal forms. Students can work together to

stimulate each other's thinking as they create papers graded as daily work rather than as final drafts for an assigned mode.

Within the context of the existing program finished papers can be considered preliminary drafts since they probably would not exemplify the required modes.

The Closet? But now the rub. Now modern becomes classical. The dissonance created can become part of a rhetoric for change, nonetheless.

To meet the requirements of the department to produce essays which conform to prescribed forms or modes, the class could experiment with putting new wine into old wineskins, trying to force their creations into modal forms assembled ages before the students started thinking.

Certainly any reasoning person could be expected to object to this kind of artificial exercise. And students will object.

Imposing the modes upon students could be like taking twenty-five kids to a clothier selling shirts, jeans, and shoes of one size and one color. "Ok, kids. Put 'em on."

"What do you mean they don't fit?

"Come on. Gray looks good on everyone.

"Who cares what the other kids will think? These are good clothes.

"They were good enough for. . . ."

Like it or not, the new rhetorician must work within the system. So into the modes the essays must go--those essays with forms of their own.

Writing Logs. Such a confrontation of contraries should stimulate lots of thinking and call for much dialogue--make smoke at least.

Predictably, a student's log will contain more vigorous language than, "This does not fit" and "I don't like the color."

When anyone, formalist or new rhetorician, compares two papers--one developed from thought to form and the same one forced into an assigned mode--and also reads a journal of a student's reactions to this process, something should happen.

Something should happen when a teacher or a department chairperson reads an entry in a log--a note about one student's thinking about the processes of composing an essay--a note telling what it means to deform that paper to make it fit a particular mode--a note written by an Asian, by a black, by a white, by a female, by a male--a note written by one thinking person telling what happens to ideas crammed into set forms.

Yes, something should happen. The logs and the two sets of papers should cry out loudly enough to catch the attention of English teachers who are thinking people, who are as intelligent and caring as are the teachers at Southerland Institute.

After the chairman of the department has read the logs and the two sets of papers, he should be ready for dialogue with the students and the teacher.

Conferencing. Conferencing need not be obsessed with product. Donald Murray's six questions for beginning a writing conference put the focus where we want it--on process. His questions can keep the conference from turning into a formalistic editing

session, not an uncommon product-centered activity.

What did you learn from this piece of writing?

What do you intend to do in the next draft?

What surprised you in the draft?

Where is the piece of writing taking you?

What do you like best in the piece of writing?

What questions do you have of me? (234)

Teacher Comments on Papers. Traditionalists like to analyze student essays as they do literary masterpieces. So do modernists. "Both classical and modern rhetorical perspectives analyze composition into 'parts'--operations, modes, and so forth--in order to learn about them." In fact, "analysis goes on in each tradition. What differs, however, is the perspective that each tradition applies to the object of analysis. . . ." One view is mechanistic, the other organic (Knoblauch and Brannon 85, 86).

These differing views will influence how one evaluates a student's paper.

A mechanistic reader may bring to the student's paper sets of rules for a student to use in revising his paper to fit a mode. Those rules will show up in the workshop, in the conference, and in peer expectations. They will also appear in ink on a student's paper.

An organic view, on the other hand, should begin with "the making of meaningful statements consistent with the writers' own purposes and their own estimations of how best to achieve them" (Knoblauch and Brannon 122).

> Freire gives advice that supports this organic view:
>
> If education is dialogical, it is clear that the role of the teacher is important, whatever the situation. As s/he dialogues with the pupils, s/he must draw attention to points that are unclear or naive, always looking at them problematically. Why? How? Is it so? What relation is there between this statement that you have just made, and that [you made earlier/later]? Is there any contradiction between them? (124-25)

But what about grading the papers written according to mode?

Here, again, students and teacher will feel the heat of stress when the paper formed by thought and squeezed or stretched to fit a prescribed mode must be graded as an example of a modal composition--graded so that the class average forms a bell curve. But most teachers and students of every persuasion seem to endure that kind of stress.

Student logs probably will reflect some of that heat.

Form: Product or Prescription? Probably traditionalists teach form from conviction.

They may suspect, however, that modern rhetoricians produce papers which lack useful order and form. Some traditionalists may be surprised that modern rhetoricians show much interest in form. Modernists believe, however, that student papers should demonstrate that good thinking creates its own forms rather. It avoids borrowing them.

Knoblauch and Brannon say that writing involves "making

assertions and coherent patterns of assertions which accomplish [the writer's] purposes" (84). No lack of form or order here. They continue:

> Organization in writing has essentially to do with [the] ability to discover relationships and convey them as sequences of assertions. The "composing process," as modern rhetoric conceives it, is the process of organizing experience through symbolic action--in this case specifically through writing as a mode of symbolic action. The process includes those elemental verbal activities which are common to all writing situations, the making and connecting of assertions within a context of evolving purposes and intended readers. (84-85)

Virus Plans Party. What would happen if, at the end of spring semester this coming year, some comp 101 students of Southerland Institute sent a present to the good-humored chairman of the English department?

The package would contain student logs, a set of papers written by mode, and a matching set of papers whose forms the students had created.

Attached to the first set of papers would be a picture of the class dressed in gray uniforms--all one size, all one style. Attached to the second set of papers would be a picture of the group wearing clothes of various colors, right sizes, and appropriate styles--clothes that fit the person and the occasion.

The card on the outside of the package would contain words

written by Walker Gibson twenty years ago:

> If we try to think of composing as pot-making rather than as map-making, then there are immediate practical consequences for writing and speaking, for reading and listening. . . . [We become aware that] the writer-speaker is forming a man-made structure, not copying down the solid shorelines of the universe. (258)

Signed,

The Pot-Makers

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